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Who needs enemies with friends like these? The importance of place for young people living in known gang areas

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Despite a growing concern about gangs in Britain, academic research that focuses on gangs remains scarce. Drawing on data from the ESRC-funded ethnographic research YOGEC (Youth Gangs in an English City) project, this paper explores the negotiation of space and place by young people living in inner-city areas affected by gangs. Using a combination of fieldwork observations and focus group and interview data, this paper charts the experiences of non-gang-involved young people living in known gang areas. These young people's restricted use of space, arising as a result of gang rivalries and the policing of inner-city areas, results in exclusion, marginalization and victimization. We illustrate how young people are identified as 'high risk', and how they continually negotiate a range of risks bound up with the territory that they inhabit and subsequent spatial boundaries that are formed. In doing so, we provide an understanding of the lives of young people who reside in places and spaces inhabited by gangs.

Keywords: social class; youth gangs; labelling; place; policing; space

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of young people who live in places labelled as 'gang areas' and who therefore are subject to surveillance and interventions by authorities as a result. It seeks to highlight the way that increasing official use of gang terminology impacts on the lives of non-gang-involved young people in their negotiations of the spaces where they live, in ways that are equally as (or more) damaging than peer-based negotiations of space (see Kintrea *et al.* 2008). We also focus on the impact that gangs have on non-gang-involved young people. We illustrate how young people in Britain who reside in places that are recognized as having gang and related firearm problems are restricted in their use of space in ways that go beyond more general accounts of youth, space and territory (Hall *et al.* 1999, Cahill 2000, MacDonald *et al.* 2005, Kintrea *et al.* 2008). We begin with a brief overview of recent British developments of the use of gang terminology among the police, community agencies, and young people themselves; within government policy; and among academic researchers.

British gangs: media hype, public fears and official responses

Young people, particularly, young, working-class males, have long been the source of public fears and the target of the press (Cohen 1972). However, in recent years,

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Britain has been 'gripped by gang fever' (Hallsworth and Young, 2004, p. 12); the latest British 'folk devils' are undoubtedly youth gangs. Recent news headlines have included: '500,000 hoodies in gangs' (*The Sun* 2006), 'The trials of living with the feral youths' (*Guardian* 2005) and 'Gun crime growing like cancer' (BBC 2003), as gun and knife crime becomes increasingly intertwined with fears of a growing British 'gang problem'.

In the absence of much recent research with a direct focus on British gangs, government, local authorities and the public are left to rely on these media accounts that 'gang culture' is endemic in our cities and that these gangs resemble popular portrayals of gangs in the USA. This relentless media focus on gangs, alongside the violent deaths of several school-aged young people, has increased the public call for a political response. In February 2007, former Prime Minister Tony Blair presided over Britain's first 'gun crime summit'. This was swiftly followed with the formation of the Home Office's Tackling Gangs Action Programme (TGAP) to identify good practice in dealing with gangs and gun crime. This has resulted in the toolkit: '*Tackling gangs: practical guide for local authorities, Crime Disorder and Reduction Partnerships (CDRPS) and other local partners*' (Home Office 2008) and a government guidance leaflet for parents on how to detect children's involvement in gangs. In Britain, academics and public bodies such as the Youth Justice Board rightly warn against the dangers of a too liberal use of gang labels; yet, the term 'gang' has become entrenched in both national and local crime and disorder strategies (e.g. Home Office 2008). Police forces and local authorities are increasingly drawing on US interventions by importing models developed in Los Angeles and Boston of dedicated firearm/gang units and multi-agency gang intervention teams, now firmly established within some British cities (Bullock and Tilley 2008, Home Office 2008).

The recent British government and local authority responses outlined here to the ostensibly increased threat posed by youth gangs – and their alleged increased use of firearms – can be understood within the theoretical discourses of risk. Many commentators have argued that we live in a society transfixed with risk (Beck 1992, Garland 2001). As a society, the management of risk is paramount to our ontological security (Giddens 1991). Reactionary policies around youth gangs can in part counter the public's fear (Garland 2001). The heightened level of risk deemed to result from youth gangs – primarily through the growing concern that they are increasingly using firearms – is new in a British context. This link between 'gangs' and guns has elevated established concerns of youth as 'troublesome' and 'folk devils' (Cohen 1972) to their being viewed as 'ruthless assassins' and 'high risk'. This is particularly the case for young people residing in 'gang areas', who are subject to labels and methods of 'risk management' that are damaging in many ways. Indeed, we must be mindful not to label our young people (Lemert 1951, Becker 1963). In 2007, prior to resigning as Chair of England and Wales Youth Justice Board, Professor Rod Morgan warned that we risk demonizing a whole generation, by labelling young people as 'thugs in hooded tops' and 'gang members' (Youth Justice Board 2007).

Policing gangs and young people: the story so far

While the formation of dedicated firearm/gang units by police in Britain is a relatively new phenomenon, gang units have existed for two decades in the USA.

During this time, many US researchers have questioned, in particular, the quality of gang-related intelligence and derived gang-members databases. Katz and Webb (2006) provide a useful and comprehensive overview. Some have suggested that police officials have arbitrarily classified individuals as gang members (Parachini and Crew 1996, cited in Katz *et al.* 2000). Others have noted how 'hearsay information' about gang affiliation is incorporated into intelligence systems (Burrell 1990, Spergel 1995), resulting in individuals being unfairly labelled gang members solely as a consequence of the neighbourhood where they live, their relationship with a known gang member, or their style of dress (Hagedorn 1990, Chesney-Lind *et al.* 1994). Others are even more scathing: in their study of gangs in Las Vegas, McCorkle and Miethe (1998) concluded that the 'gang problem' could be attributed to a moral panic constructed by the police department to obtain resources and regain legitimacy within the community. On the other hand, there are researchers who have argued that 'gang information systems may be more helpful to police than first believed' and that they correctly identify criminally active individuals (Katz *et al.*, 2000, p. 432). In Britain, these controversial US gang interventions have slipped unquestioned into mainstream policy and practice. It is probable that adopting a similar model of US gang interventions and surveillance will result in similar gang labelling practices. Indeed, in tracking the development of a Manchester-based gang intervention programme that was based on the Boston Gun Project, Bullock and Tilley (2008, p. 38) have noted 'unresolved concerns about the risks of labelling and stereotyping young people', as well as poorly evidenced 'gang membership'.

Several studies have highlighted how the police construct populations of 'permanent suspects' based on socio-economic status as much as on serious and persistent offending. These studies also note how 'street life' places young people at greater risk of adversarial contact with authority (Aye-Maung 1995, Flood-Page *et al.* 2000, McAra and McVie 2005). There is a substantial body of literature that discusses how police 'working rules' are used to construct a suspect population (McConville *et al.* 1991, 1997, Smith 1991, Reiner 1997, Quinton *et al.* 2000). These informal rules, based on police culture, are said to impact differently according to a range of demographics. One such important demographic, as we will discuss in this paper, is area of residence. The new policing of gangs and gang members, through the use of dedicated gang units with a remit to target youth gangs in particular areas, has the potential to intensify police attention on young people who have the misfortune to reside in known gang areas.

The links between gangs and gun crime is also significant for the policing of young people in known gang areas. There is a long history in Britain in relation to problematic police stop-and-search practices, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities (see Scarman 1981, Bowling and Phillips 2002, Sharp and Atherton 2007). Yet, despite the introduction of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE 1984) and subsequent amendments to the recording requirements for all stops – whether a search ensues or not (Home Office 2004) – due process is clouded by Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Section 60, once authorized by an inspector (typically for a 24-hour period), allows officers to stop and search any individual within a defined area without 'reasonable suspicion' when it is anticipated that serious violence may occur or that offensive weapons such as firearms may be carried.¹ The constant threat of gun crime in known gang areas, coupled with increased police surveillance by dedicated firearm and gang units,

intensifies police attention on young people living in these areas and results in more vulnerability to excessive stop and search.

The enduring significance of class and place in youth experiences

In recent decades, it has been suggested that social class is of diminishing significance, as globalization has led to a more risk-based society (Beck 1992). Social theorists have similarly downplayed the importance of place, noting that growing geographical mobility has resulted in everyday experiences becoming increasingly disembedded from physical location (Calhoun 1991, Giddens 1991). In specific relation to youth studies, Blackman (2005) has been critical of postmodern, post-subcultural theory that places greater emphasis on agency and the individual at the expense of critical discussion of the structures and institutions that exist and continue to marginalize some sections of young people. He notes the lack of critical application to young people's social, economic and cultural realities. It is important that youth research seeks to address this omission, as Shildrick and MacDonald (2006, p. 126) argue: 'A proper, holistic understanding of youth *requires* a closer appreciation of the ways in which young people's leisure and cultural lives intersect with wider aspects of their biographies.' In these critiques of post-subcultural studies, both Blackman (2005) and Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) have pointed to the tendency to empirically ignore the lives and identities of less advantaged young people, while theoretically underplaying the potential significance of class and other social inequalities.²

In contrast, MacDonald *et al.* (2005) have stressed the continuing importance of class and place for young people. Kintrea *et al.* (2008) reached a similar conclusion in their study of territoriality and territorial conflict in six British cities, stating that all the areas they encountered with 'territorial conflict' were areas containing multiple disadvantage. Significantly, they found this type of conflict to be much less evident in the more advantaged areas of each city. Kintrea and colleagues also suggest that the limitations that ensue as a result of young people's restricted spatial mobility actually inhibit transitions to adult life, as, for example, by restricting access to education. The lives of the young people presented in these recent British studies are highly bound up with their social class and the places they lived. Youth gangs similarly challenge the notion that class and place are not important in understanding young people's lives. Gang research has long associated gangs with the most deprived areas in inner cities (Thrasher 1927, Shaw and McKay 1942, Cohen 1955, Miller 1958, Cloward and Ohlin 1960, Parker 1974). Hagedorn (1988) uses an 'urban underclass' framework while Venkatesh (1997, p. 82) similarly notes how street gangs, together with teenage pregnancy and welfare state dependency, have become a 'signature attribute of ghetto life'. More recently, Vigil (2002) refers to 'multiple marginality' in his explanation of the existence of gangs across a range of diverse communities.

As with class, the links between gangs and space are important. Tita *et al.* (2005) have noted that not only are gangs spatially concentrated among disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but also, within this, they occupy what they term 'gang set space'. These are geographically defined areas within a neighbourhood where gang members 'hang out'. Klein (1995, p. 18) refers to these areas where gangs hang out as 'the life space of the gang'.

Kintrea *et al.* (2008) are the latest to note the bounded use of space by young people, due to (potential) conflict with other peers. For the most part, Kintrea *et al.* (2008) steer clear of using the term 'gang', instead bypassing the problems of gang definitions by focusing on 'territoriality'. Hence, they take the well-trodden path in British academia of avoiding a direct focus on the 'gang'.³ In contrast, the focus here is firmly on 'gangs' and the implications of gang labels for places and the young people who live there. We do not refer here to 'gangs' unproblematically. Indeed, what follows is a highly critical account of the dangers and impact on young people's lives that the over-liberal use of the terms 'gang member' and 'gang associate' can entail. This additional focus on official responses to 'youth gangs' highlights a further dimension to young people's negotiations of space and place that goes beyond peer conflict.

This paper presents the experiences of non-gang-involved young people who live in areas of a city where gangs and gun crime are firmly established. We explore how the risks associated with gangs and gun crime lead young people wrongly identified as gang members or associates to develop coping strategies and how policy-level responses impact negatively on them, and in turn, on their identity, future aspirations and transitions to adulthood. As will be illustrated, in known gang areas the gang labels and treatment that follow form a central part of young people's experiences.

Methods

The findings presented in this paper are based upon the ESRC-funded YOGEC (Youth Gangs in an English City) ethnographic study, which involved 26 months of participant observation, nine focus groups and 107 formal interviews. Time was spent hanging around and socializing with gang members, their associates, ex-gang members and other young people in 'gang' communities. Fieldwork also included attendance at community events, volunteering in youth centres frequented by gang- and non-gang-involved young people, and involvement in community groups concerned with gang violence. The data analysed here draw extensively on two focus group interviews with non-gang youth, interviews with 'gang associates' and with senior police officers, and fieldwork observations of young people who live in known gang areas.

The research took place in an English city, and to maintain its anonymity it is referred to here as 'Research City'. This brief summary of the methods used glosses over many challenges and adaptations to the original research outline. For a more detailed discussion of the methodology and the rationale for the decision not to disclose the name of the city, see Aldridge *et al.* (2008). The research covered six 'gang' areas of the city. The focus in this paper is on one area of the city where gangs were most entrenched, referred to here as *Inner West*. This area encompassed some of the most ethnically diverse and disadvantaged areas of the city and had a gang problem that was widely recognized by the police, young people, the local communities, the city council, and a range of statutory and voluntary sector organizations. When discussing 'gangs' here, our starting point for a working definition in our research was the Eurogang definition: 'Any durable street orientated youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity.'⁴ Although not explicit in this definition, the use of firearms was an important defining feature of gangs for city authorities. Some of the more established gangs associated with this area have been in existence for up to 20 years. They have been

viewed as responsible for a series of fatal shootings and serious woundings of predominantly young males (aged 14 to 25). During the fieldwork, six young males from this area were fatally shot and many more shot at and injured.

Results

Everyone's a target: restrictions on the use of public space as a consequence of fear and gang victimization

Living in known gang areas significantly limited the use of space for the non-gang young people in our research. When discussing the boundaries of the areas where they felt safe, several young people in one focus group described the space between two local fast-food takeaways – a mere 500 metres apart. When asked what they feared, these non-gang young people would typically cite the risk of street robbery and/or assault by gangs from rival areas and, in common with known gang members, they ultimately feared being shot. It was common for these young people to discuss the problems they experienced when venturing into an area whose gangs have established rivalries with gangs in their area. When young people encountered others from rival gang areas, typically they would be asked: 'Who you down with?' and some young people reported that their mobile phone contact lists were searched through with repercussions possible depending on whom they were found to associate with. These confrontations occurred on public transport and in the city centre, shopping centres, and entertainment venues, as well as in rival gang areas. The fear of victimization that resulted restricted the mobility of these non-gang young people. The problems they encountered are discussed by participants in this focus group:

Yeah, if you go out of your own area, if you're dressed like some hot boy⁵ and that, black clothing and that, then people will attack you and that and they ask you questions. [IWFG41: 16-year-old, white male]

We can't go to Main Road. [...] We go to Main Road, yeah, and straight away, 'Yeah, there's a Upperside man, let's get him.' [IWFG11: 15-year-old, white male]

The risk of being a victim of gun crime intensified young people's fears of venturing into rival gang areas:

I've got a brother, I fret when he leaves the estate. You understand where I'm coming from? Because he's going out to people that are not from around here, and might not like people off this estate. Do you understand where I'm coming from? And it makes you trapped; it makes you feel trapped anyway. Because you think, 'Well if I move out, I'm gonna have to move way out.' Because there are certain places, because your list or whatever is so long, there is gang members, and you might get to know them. And like there's people, you might have known them before they were gang members, and know them just as that person. And then you know all those people over there who want to kill him, you know what I mean, so you're not gonna go over there. But you've got to go over there to see your friends. [Interviewer: Because they might associate you with them, yeah?] And I'm not a gang member, but I might have friends. You get where I'm coming from? So therefore it would make me wary going in certain places. [IWFG42: 18-year-old, white female]

The fear of becoming embroiled in violent encounters led many young people to stay within particular areas within their neighbourhoods. However, as we discuss below,

remaining within the confines of these areas did not offer complete protection either, as it could also lead to unwanted attention from both rival gangs and the police.

While gangs may be associated with an entire neighbourhood or housing estate, 'set space' refers to the specific streets, spaces and buildings where gang members are known to congregate (Tita *et al.* 2005). In Research City, these set spaces were evident and of central importance in the process of labelling young people as gang members. Young people who attended certain youth and community buildings where gangs were known to go or who resided in these set spaces became labelled as gang members or gang associates by rival gangs – despite a lack of self-identification or criminality (two factors common to many gang definitions), as this white, male police intelligence officer discusses:

West Park, I would say from experience, is the heart of Lowerside territory. Now rightly or wrongly, any male seen in that area, who frequents that area, would be regarded by opposing factions as being a gang member and that is very sad, but unfortunately that's how it's progressed. Likewise anyone on Long Lane, Upperside Gang, bang, they're going to be tarred with that brush, whether they've got allegiance and you know it's got to that extreme. [K112]

Young people had to navigate carefully the known gang places and spaces within their neighbourhoods. Gang set spaces became targets for rival gang attacks, with instances of drive-by shootings and one instance during fieldwork of a rival gang entering community buildings in balaclavas. These kinds of events resulted in local young people refusing to occupy these spaces, understandably deeming them 'unsafe'. This resulted in well-resourced, purpose-built facilities for young people remaining empty and underused. Many of the young people who lived close to youth facilities told us how they did not frequent them due to fear of harassment or even drive-by shootings from rival gangs. This view is summed up here by this young man:

There are loads of people that ain't gang members that get shot. [...] 'We've seen you speaking to so-and-so so we're coming for you.' [...] I think everyone's a target; every young person in the area is a target really, if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time. [IWGA6: 15-year-old, black male]

This view is echoed here:

They don't care who you are. As long as you're on that estate they'll just – they'll just shoot at anything. It could be even your little brother. There's been people playing on bouncy castles, and people driving by and shooting. The bouncy castle's getting popped and that. [IWFG41: 16-year-old, white male]

Young people living in these areas therefore perceived themselves to be at risk of serious violent attacks simply by being in the wrong place. Residing in these areas also had consequences in terms of how the police would view and subsequently police young people.

'By the company that he keeps': the significance of place for police applications of gang labels

Fearful of venturing into areas with gangs in rivalry to their own areas, non-gang young people would limit themselves to their local streets and places where they felt safer. This invariably brought them into contact with suspected gang members from

their own areas. Their occupation of these spaces once more proved important in relation to police responses to them. The police employed similar strategies to those of rival gangs when evaluating whether somebody was a gang member, most often based on being seen in the company of known gang members. The way young people were labelled as 'gang members' or 'gang associates' is illustrated here by a police officer with over a decade of experience of working on gang-related crime in this part of the city:

It's difficult to quantify gang members. I mean certainly there's like, you know, three or more engaged in criminal activity blah, blah, blah and all this business, and I always turn round and say, 'OK, if somebody says to me, "Is Joe Bloggs a gang member?" And I will obviously look at what we know about him and say, 'Well, if he's been stop-checked once or twice with a known gang member, he's on the periphery.' But he's getting stop-checked regular, then you've got to say, 'Well, look, by the company that he keeps we believe that he's a gang member.' [K112]

Consistent with previous accounts of police practice and 'working rules' (see McConville *et al.* 1991, McAra and McVie 2005), young people attracted police attention as a result of keeping the wrong company rather than as a result of involvement in criminal activity. Indeed, being seen in the company of 'known' gang members was crucial to the police application of the gang label in Research City. In the absence of a clear official definition of what constitutes a 'gang member' in practice, association was both a necessary and sufficient condition for the application of the label, and despite a strong association in Research City between gangs and serious crime, criminal engagement was not a necessary official defining feature of gang membership for the police, let alone co-offending with known gang members. For those living or socializing in gang set spaces, it is inevitable that they will come into contact with gang members. Moreover, as a strategy of self-defence, to befriend 'the gang' would seem logical. The non-gang young people we spoke to perceived behaving in a superficially friendly manner to gang members they knew (for example, greeting them in the street) was an effective strategy to avoid being victimized by them. Indeed, many young people who knew and had grown up with gang members, including siblings, often expressed negative views of gangs and the related activities gang members engaged in, especially serious violence and other forms of criminality. However, young people living in these areas were regularly stop-checked by police; the suspicion of gang involvement would result if they were in the company of those police considered to be 'known' gang members. Because police designate gang affiliation on the basis of being seen with 'known' gang members, it is inevitable that these observations will result in false positives.

Lemert (1951) and Becker (1963) describe the impact of deviant labels in relation to the potential for secondary deviance and further criminality. What we witnessed in our research was the potential for entire neighbourhoods (especially those living in gang set spaces) of young people to be labelled as 'gang members' or 'gang associates' and to receive high levels of police attention as a consequence of being born and raised in estates and streets with established gang associations. This young man describes being considered by the police to be a member of a 40-strong gang:

I don't even think there really is a gang in Shanklytown. [*Interviewer*: So all the ones like I mentioned to you before, you know, the police have said there's about 40...] 40 Crestside Crew and all that! [laughs] [*Interviewer*: So what would you say?] I would say

there's about three, innit. . . . They aren't in Crestside Crew yeah, 'cause the police have said to me if you're seen speaking to a gang member, if they see you speaking to a gang member, automatically they put you in a gang. [*Interviewer*: So the police have said that to you?] Yeah, so the 40 people that they say, that could just be, they're young people from Crestside, that like, these three gang members I spoke to. And then, like, if you say that I'm in a gang, if they see me speaking to a gang member now, who I speak to must be in a gang too and who they speak to. It's daft really. [IWGA8: 16-year-old, black male]

McAra and McVie (2005) have noted a similar cycle of police labelling of young people in Scotland, in which young people with friends known to the police are twice as likely to come into contact with the police, regardless of any criminality. In Research City, the specific association with gangs and gun crime elevates these more general police suspicions to another level. Many of the young people we got to know during the fieldwork became labelled as gang members or gang associates, even where they did not self-define as a gang member, held strongly anti-gang views, and did not engage in criminal activity. Nevertheless, once labelled, they were treated – by police and subsequently by other agencies such as schools – as capable of serious crimes, or as posing potential or actual risks as a result of the label. The following section outlines some of the repercussions of these gang labels.

Police surveillance, raids, stops and searches and other spatial restrictions

Being labelled as a gang member or associate created a greater vulnerability to police attention and surveillance. Armed police raids on family homes in search for firearms were common and brought stigma, stress and feelings of violation to the families involved. Young people living in these areas and labelled as 'gang associates' were often subjected to police checks and exclusion from community events including carnivals and family fun days. We regularly attended these events and witnessed how young people from the youth clubs where we worked were sometimes prevented from entering, and on occasion, overtly filmed by the police. Their access was denied due to apparent gang associations on the grounds of public safety and potential conflict between rival gangs. Again, many of these young people had no criminal history and did not view themselves as gang involved. Likewise, their peers did not see them as gang members, nor did members of the gangs that they were allegedly affiliated to, as we know from conversations and interviews with gang members and associates.

The police adopted a proactive method of harassment of people they identified as 'gang members'. When known gang members were visible on the streets where they live, they had to negotiate unwanted attention from the police as well as from rival gangs, who may target their hangouts with drive-by shootings, as this gang intelligence officer noted:

If we suddenly see Crestside Crew emerging on Long Lane, bang, get over there, get our uniform lads to absolutely hammer them, harass them, do them for anything they can. So they basically think, 'We've had enough of this', and we can dampen things down [...] but [hanging around on the streets] from our point of view makes them a target. Lowerside lads can drive by, so if we're dispersing them and displacing them, it's diminishing the problem again. [K116]

Earlier, it was noted how streets and places become known as gang set spaces, and this is clearly evident in this account, as is the risk of drive-by shootings by rival gangs. This police ‘harassment’ tactic was frequently discussed by the non-gang young people who lived in these areas, as this young man discusses:

Like when the police say, ‘Where are you from?’ and you say like, ‘Belmont’, straight away, ‘Have you been in trouble?’ ‘No.’ ‘Are you sure?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Right, let me PNC⁶ your ID. Are you sure you’ve not been in trouble before? I’ll check. Have you got any guns on you? Rear⁷ always asking you. [IWFG12: 16-year-old, white male]

A focus group with non-gang youth in a rival gang area uncovered similar experiences:

IWFG43: 17-year-old, white male: They judge everyone the same; they judge every person the same, no matter like how you dress and that.

IWFG42: 18-year-old, white female: Yeah if you haven’t got serial numbers on your shoulder, that’s how they go on really, you know.

IWFG44: 16-year-old, Asian male: Yeah and if you talk back to them, then they think he’s Windham Gang.

IWFG43: 17-year-old, white male: If you’re dressed in all black, he’ll see you as a gang member.

As this discussion indicates, young people viewed this type of unwanted (and in their view unwarranted) police attention and continued stop-checks – both formal and informal – as police harassment. Non-gang young people from these areas recounted being stopped by the police at least weekly, often two or three times per week, and on occasion, two or three times per day. Their experiences are typified in the following focus group discussion:

[*Interviewer:* So how many times have you been stopped by the police?] It just depends. Say if I went to Ashland, yeah, I’d get pulled like twice a day. If you go into Ashland, yeah, they’re just pulling you, ‘Where are you from? Where are you from?’ ‘Belmont.’ ‘Yeah, what are you doing round here? Coming round causing trouble?’ [IWFG11: 16-year-old, white male]

[*Interviewer:* So on average, how many times do you get stopped?] Well, the most about three times a week. [IWFG12: 16-year-old, white male]

[*Interviewer:* And what about other people, is that the same for everybody?] No, some are getting picked – like some are getting followed around all day long. [IWFG11: 16-year-old, white male]

Well, about three weeks ago I got stopped and searched every day within like – for about seven days it was, but every day continuously. [IWFG43: 17-year-old, white male]

Previous studies have indicated that the type of repeated negative police contact documented here helps to reinforce young people’s hostility to the police (Flood-Page *et al.* 2000, McAra and McVie 2005). These repeated altercations with the police resulted, for the young people in our research, in antagonistic relationships with the police and mistrust of them, as illustrated, for example, by their unwillingness to report crimes against them to the police or to assist the police in their enquiries. Not surprisingly then, many young people held a negative attitude to the police:

[Interviewer: So how would you describe your relationship with the police, then?]

IWFG11: 16-year-old, white male: Bastards.

IWFG15: 14-year-old, black male: Sort of like bastards.

IWFG18: 15-year-old, white male: Pests.

IWFG12: 15-year-old, black male: Yeah.

IWFG16: 16-year-old, white male: Like fucking cockroaches.

Several: [laugh]

This hostility shown to the police together with more general mistrust and lack of confidence in the local police force is consistent with recent research from both the USA (Brunson and Miller 2006) and Britain (Sharp and Atherton 2007). It is telling here that non-gang young people, regardless of ethnicity, reported similar experiences and perceptions of the police. However, while the police responded to all young people in these areas as potential gang members, regardless of ethnic origin, ethnicity was important in how police defined areas as 'gang areas' and individuals as 'gang members', as we will discuss in more depth in future publications.

The impact of living in known gang areas: gang labelling and its consequences

Much of the literature on the labelling process (Lemert 1951, Becker 1963) and constructions of 'suspect populations' (McConville *et al.* 1991, Quinton *et al.* 2000) has focused on how these deviant labels and associations can lead to further criminality. Setting aside the question of whether, or the extent to which, the application of labels can lead to actual gang joining,⁸ here we describe a range of other consequences of the use of one specific kind of deviant label, the gang label – applied to both individuals and communities.

The labelling of young people as gang members or associates not only affected their experiences and use of public space but also their interactions with authorities. These gang association labels affected their experiences in secondary and further education, their aspirations, and ultimately their transitions to adulthood. To illustrate the magnitude of the consequences gang labels can have for young people, one young man's experience is discussed here as a case study. The problems he encountered including school exclusion, police raids and excessive police monitoring were recounted and experienced by several other young people known to the research team.

Dwain (not his real name), a 16-year-old black male, frequented a youth club where the lead author worked as a volunteer. He aspired to work in the music industry and to study law. He had never been arrested or charged with any offence. He was interviewed because of having several cousins involved in gangs. The youth clubs he frequented were also attended by gang members and he lived on the same street as several known gang members. Consequently, his street and local youth club were classed by police as 'gang set spaces' (Tita *et al.* 2005). He expressed anti-gang attitudes: 'Gang stuff is just daft' and condemned individual gang members: 'There's only a few smart ones that make money. The rest of them are just daft.' Nevertheless,

he was considered to be a gang member or associate by the police and subsequently treated as a risk to his school. His response to this was damning: 'If they're telling me that I'm in a gang, they don't know anything'

Yet, despite his denial and demands made to police to see the intelligence that led to this label, the association remained and resulted in a sequence of highly exclusionary events. During his final year of secondary school, a few months before his final exams, his school was informed by the police that he was a gang member, although they were unable to specify which gang due to insufficient evidence. Although never arrested for any offence or known to be involved in gang conflict in his school, he was temporarily suspended. The police evidence for this association was requested by his family but, at this stage, was not forthcoming.⁹ He recalled how his school justified his suspension:

They were saying to me that if I'm in a gang, that's bringing trouble for the school, 'cause that will bring the gang members to the school and that, after school and that, and kids will get robbed and all that, just talking rubbish. [Interviewer: They're saying that's down to you?] Yeah, that I'm a risk to the school if I'm in a gang and all that.

Being excluded from school was not an isolated occurrence for young people living in these known gang areas. Fortunately, Dwain was eventually able to return to school and sit his exams. The practice of excluding young people from schools highlights the emerging trend of a heightened sense of risk that schools, local authorities and police forces are alert to. At another school, a high-achieving student in his penultimate year, together with two school friends, was permanently excluded after a group of young men had gathered at the school gates and threatened to kill him. This event resulted in the school seeking guidance from local authority and police personnel who work on gang interventions. They labelled him as a 'gang member', as a result of family links to gangs and subsequently, despite being a good student with no previous school warnings or involvement in crime, he was excluded because he posed a 'serious risk to students and staff safety'.¹⁰ It is difficult to find a replacement school when a young person is deemed as posing a 'high risk' to students and staff. In addition, his status as a victim of crime was ignored and his exclusion meant that he was once more victimized.

Exclusionary experiences like the ones illustrated here have wider implications for young people's transitions to employment. Young people in these areas frequently discussed the way that they felt excluded and marginalized because of the area where they lived. Others had fractious relationships with the education system as well as with the police. Non-gang young people discussed how teachers, aware of where they lived, would predict that they would end up a 'drug dealer', a 'gang member' or 'dead'. This may contribute to the low aspirations among young people we encountered in the research. Those who did pursue further education and job training recounted how they were negatively judged once they disclosed where they lived, as this 17-year-old, white male stated:

Well, I've been like at Westside College, and all these teachers and that, they're all like from Westside [a suburban area], you know, all posh places like that. So when they go, 'Where are you from?' and then like you mention Belmont, they look at you weird, they judge you weird, because they're used to like, you know, the posh areas, being able to walk around the streets and all that. [Interviewer: So even when you're out of the area like that and you're in college, you think you get treated...?] If you mention where

you're from, they will judge you, the same as other people would, where you are.
[IWFG43: 17-year-old, white male]

These experiences and perceptions had important consequences. During fieldwork, we encountered numerous examples of young people who had given up on seeking employment, long before they had reached the official school-leaving age of 16. Young people would refer to the stigma that their gang-affected area had and how nobody would give them a job once they knew their postcode. Regardless of whether these views hold true, their perceptions, enforced by negative interactions with police and other officials, were enough to make many young people give up trying. As noted earlier, young people (whether gang or non-gang affiliated) living in these known gang areas – gang or non-gang affiliated – experienced a curtailing of their geographical and social movement. This limited mobility consequently restricted their access to services. Hence, not all young people are able to access leisure and other services in the same way and therefore, as Ball *et al.* (2000) observe, the capacity to participate and consume varies among young people in dependence on structural factors, with social class and place clearly relevant here to these young people's experiences (see also Bose 2003, Blackman 2005, Shildrick and MacDonald 2006).

Discussion and conclusions

Our findings confirm the view that the social construction and regulation of public space are further contributing to the social exclusion of marginalized young people (White 1996) and that this has become more of a problem with the development of new regulatory practices and powers (Collins and Kearns 2001). Policy responses to gangs may contribute to these exclusionary processes and lead to social control mechanisms with the characteristics outlined by Stanley Cohen (1979) in his well-known, dystopian essay 'The Punitive City': blurred boundaries between inside and out, guilty and innocent; broadened and increasingly fuzzy definitions of crime; an expanded social control net; and dispersed state social control mechanisms beyond prison (or office) walls.

In the British context, recent academic discussion of gangs has tended to focus on definitions of what a gang is and whether they even exist (see Hallsworth and Young 2004, Young *et al.* 2007, Pitts 2008). The experiences presented here of young people living in known gang areas has clearly demonstrated that a serious problem for many young people who reside in these areas concerns the individual level definition of who is a 'gang member' or 'gang associate'. The accounts from non-gang-involved young people and those who dispute their gang-status labels illustrate that the less discriminate use of these terms by both gang-involved youth and officials has severe implications for the personal safety and exclusion of those who live in known gang areas.

It is commonly understood that the organization of youth gangs is fluid and their membership difficult to identify (Esbensen *et al.* 2001, Sullivan 2005). Yet, the evidence presented here demonstrates that local authorities and police forces often seem to apply the gang label based on association in gang-affected neighbourhoods – that is, observing a young person together with a 'known gang member'. These labels have serious consequences for those born and raised in such areas. We encountered a

growing concern within these communities over the use of official gang labels with information of varying quality about individuals suspected of gang activity. Young people with family relationships to gang members, who attended the same schools, youth provisions or set spaces, or who lived on the same streets as gang members were in danger of being considered by police to be gang members themselves, or at least 'gang associated' and subjected to increased surveillance and intervention, regardless of criminal involvement. This resulted in exclusion from community events and, more worryingly, exclusion from the education system.

In areas with established gang associations, it is difficult, if not impossible, for young people to avoid association with gang members. They attended the same local schools, youth and community centres; places of worship; and sports, music and drama groups, and hung out on the same streets. This was particularly the case for those young people who lived in gang set spaces. Hence, when spotted in conversation or stopped and searched by the police, they would often be labelled as 'gang associated' if not as fully fledged 'gang members'. Rival gangs also interpreted these types of interactions with known gang members and sightings in gang set spaces as a sign of gang membership or allegiance. The result, as illustrated here, was as serious as permanent school exclusion, dawn raids by armed police and victimization. The young people who resided in these already marginalized areas were subsequently victims of further marginalization, exclusion and stigmatization, which increased their levels of disaffection and diminished their opportunities.

Place and class were central to these experiences. Young people encountered in these working-class areas associated with gangs were victimized, marginalized and excluded in many ways, as a consequence of this association – regardless of whether they were gang members or not. Historically, it has been widely accepted that gangs emerge under conditions of social exclusion. What these findings have highlighted is that further social exclusion of young people is a by-product of areas becoming firmly associated with gangs. We therefore need to identify strategies for the policing of gangs that are both successful and respectful of civil liberty concerns. With the increasing focus on risk management, the types of practices of some of our most marginalized young people that we have documented are likely not only to persist but also to expand and intensify. This is evident in the current climate of governmental concern around dealing with youth gangs (Home Office 2008) and continued investment and expansion of dedicated police units and other statutory agencies with a remit to target 'youth gangs'. Ironically, this type of persistent policing may well contribute to offending behaviour (McAra and McVie 2005), police mistrust (Sharp and Atherton 2007), poor legal socialization (Fagan and Tyler 2005) and perhaps reinforced gang identities.

The lived reality of the young people we encountered, regardless of their status as 'gang member', 'gang associate' or 'non-gang', was one of marginalization and exclusion. This is in contrast to the picture painted in the British media of fearless young people marauding through our cities. They are instead highly *fearful*. Already living in deprived neighbourhoods, they are further excluded and victimized through association with gangs. MacDonald *et al.* (2005, p. 873) note how 'Locally embedded social networks become part of the process whereby poverty and class inequalities are reproduced.' In this instance, youth gangs can be seen as one form of social network that serves to reproduce inequalities. The interactions with authorities and other young people may further bolster 'gang culture'.

In line with both Kintrea *et al.* (2008) and Marshall *et al.* (2004), this paper has highlighted young people's fears of leaving the streets and estates where they live due to perceived threats of gangs from surrounding areas. For young people living in the most disadvantaged areas, this limited mobility can further reinforce their social exclusion and limit their access to services. As Kintrea *et al.* (2008, p. 14) note, 'It is not just the fact of the negative impacts of territorial behaviour that appears to be the issue for young people, but also that they occur at a crucial stage in their lives.' In this respect, their subsequent transitions to adulthood are affected by these social and physical restrictions.

Inner-city neighbourhood reputations can be extremely negative (e.g. Fraser 1996). In our research, we adopted the strategy of not disclosing publicly the neighbourhoods – even the city – in which our research was conducted, at least in part to avoid further stigmatizing what we anticipated would be communities already feeling stigmatized by 'gang' reputations and by other markers of inner-city deprivation. We assess this strategy as vindicated in part by the results reported in this paper. We have shown that the gang label is indeed a dangerous one – and not just for young people involved in gangs but also for the young people living in gang-affected areas who are wrongly assumed to be gang members by the police and rival gangs based on their use of place and space, as well as more broadly for non-gang young people who are often victimized and stigmatized as they carry with them the reputations of having come from gang-affected neighbourhoods.

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Notes

1. Section 60 was typically used in the days that followed a shooting incident. The use of Section 60 was also common at events such as carnivals or other community and musical events where the police anticipated attendance by gang members.
2. Shildrick and MacDonald (2006, p. 129) note the paradox that, in contrast to the popular media focus on young, working-class 'hoodies', 'gangs' and general anti-social behaviour, discussed above, in much of the contemporary academic studies on youth and leisure, the cultural identities and practices of working-class youth – especially the most marginalized and disadvantaged sections – rarely feature.
3. This reluctance to use gang terminology in Britain dates back almost half a century (see Downes 1966), and the term remains highly contested to the present day (see also Young *et al.* 2007).
4. The Eurogang Network was formed with the remit of agreeing consistent definition, questions and methodologies to allow comparative international gang research. For more information see its website at: <http://www.umsl.edu/~ccj/eurogang/euroganghome.htm>.
5. The term 'hot boy' was used locally by young people to describe young males who were frequently talked about due to what they were involved in. This could mean they were regularly stopped by the police, or wanted/attacked by rival gangs, or known to carry a weapon such as a firearm. The term was also more generically used to refer to somebody who dressed and acted like a stereotypical gang member. Its origins may lie in the 1999 film *Hot Boyz* (also known as *Gang Law*), a US gangster movie starring the rap artist Snoop Dog.
6. 'PNC' refers here to the Police National Computer. When the police stop a member of the public, this national computer system is used to check for any additional information such

- as outstanding warrants for arrest or previous convictions, or to confirm that the information provided is consistent.
7. 'Rear' or more typically, 'rear, rear, rear' was often used in conversation by many people when they were recounting an event or conversation in the same way that 'etc., etc.' or 'and so on' are more commonly used.
 8. The possible reasons why young people become involved in gangs will be discussed in future publications with a focus on onset of gang involvement/membership.
 9. It took a subsequent official police complaint against his treatment and labelling as a gang member to ascertain the police intelligence that led to this label. It emerged that on a couple of occasions when he had been routinely stopped by the police in his neighbourhood (a regular occurrence for him and other young people in his area), he was in the company of suspected gang members or 'naughty lads', as one officer put it.
 10. Ironically, a consistent theme that emerged through discussion and interviews with gang members was how the education system failed them. Leaving school was identified as a 'critical moment' for either the onset of gang involvement or more sustained gang and offending involvement.

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